

IMCOM-Europe Soldiers aim for excellence

STUTTGART, Germany – Call it the Army’s version of an Olympic decathlon. Eleven Soldiers assigned to garrisons throughout Europe spend three days undergoing a comprehensive evaluation of skills ranging from physical fitness to military knowledge – and their ability to remain poised under pressure.

It was part of the Installation Management Command-Europe’s Soldier and Noncommissioned Officer of the Year competition, held here May 21-23 on Kelley Barracks and Panzer Kaserne. The event took participants from the fitness center to the firing range, with stops in the classroom and at a conference table along the way

“It’s kind of like the movie ‘Any Given Sunday.’ Whoever wants it the most,” said Command Sgt. Major John M. Gaines, IMCOM-Europe command sergeant major. “We test what they know and what they think they know.”

The result was a chance not only to identify the command’s top Soldier and NCO performer but also to improve the overall skills of each participant. Winners will be announced June 12 in Heidelberg, Germany, and will represent IMCOM-Europe in the Army-wide competition, scheduled at Fort A.P. Hills, Va., later this year.

The contest began as competitors reported to the Kelley Fitness Center at 6 a.m. for push-ups, sit-ups and a two-mile run.

Afterwards, Soldiers boarded vans bound for the indoor rifle range on Panzer Kaserne for their next event: weapons qualification. Using M-16 rifles, Soldiers fired 20 shots from two different positions: supported prone (on sandbags) and unsupported prone (on elbows), at a target 25 meters away.



Sgt. Jake T. Brice, USAG Garrison Benelux, Belgium, identifies key points on a map during the land navigation event of the Installation Management Command-Europe Soldier and Noncommissioned Officer of the Year competition.

“The best Soldiers are poised and focused. They take one task at a time and don’t let their competitors get to them,” said participant Sgt. Adam Villareal of U.S. Army Garrison Vicenza, Italy, following the event.

The competition returned to Kelley Barracks later that afternoon for a mental marathon, as each of the candidates traded rifles for pencils to complete an essay and written exam. The day ended on Cooper Field as Sgt. First Class Vincenzo Avanzini, USAG Stuttgart military police, evaluated each Soldier’s knowledge of selected Warrior Tasks and Drills, such as reading terrain features on a map or checking a MK19 grenade launcher.

“Every Soldier should be able to shoot, move and communicate on the battlefield,” Avanzini said. “These tasks are designed to pinpoint all three major skill sets.”

The second day began at dawn under drizzly skies as Soldiers completed a 20-kilometer ruck march through woods near Panzer Kaserne.

Start time was 4:30 a.m. Soldiers were given four hours to finish the event. “You either qualify, or you don’t,” said 1st Sgt. Jose Cruz, an evaluator from USAG Stuttgart. “It’s that simple.”

The competition gave no pause for sore feet as Soldiers transitioned immediately to the land navigation event, held in the Limited Training Area. Soldiers were given three items: a laminated map, protractor and compass. The task was to find five markers in less than three hours for a maximum of 50 points. Later that evening, Soldiers regrouped at the LTA to repeat the event using the same three items and a batch of chemical lights.

“You really have to know what you’re doing to get close,” said Spc. Marco Garced, USAG Stuttgart, who competed in the SOY category. “There’s a lot of heavy brush out there.”

The final day’s evaluation was centered around an appearance before a board of six command sergeants major, who peppered Soldiers on topics ranging from military shoulder patches to teams competing in the NBA playoffs. Questions centered on such areas as leadership, military history, weapons operations and current events.

“You have to be meticulous to do well,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Mark Q. Barbary, USAG Stuttgart, who coordinated and oversaw the three-day competition. “The point is to keep it intense. It should feel like a murder board. ‘They torture us, but we get something out of it’ kind of idea.” Barbary added: “The board wants to make sure these Soldiers have the warrior skills to survive on the battlefield.”

The pressure mounted early in the waiting room as sponsors and Soldiers inspected uniforms and reviewed Army study guides. “Showtime,” as Barbary called it, began when a Soldier knocked twice on a closed door and was directed to enter a room, where they saluted the board, presented their uniform and took a seat.

“It’s nerve wrecking,” Garced said after spending more than 30 minutes under the heat lamp. “I’m just relieved it’s over.”



The USAG Benelux, Belgium, contingency for the Installation Management Command-Europe Soldier and Noncommissioned Officer of the Year competition review last-minute material before facing a review board.

Regardless of the final tally, Gaines noted that just to compete in the event is an honor. “What we’re asking of them is over and beyond their normal duties,” said IMCOM-Europe’s command sergeant major. “They should all be proud.”